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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000053

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: DIPLOMATS COORDINATE STRATEGY ON BANGLADESH
POLITICAL CRISIS

REF: DHAKA 00032

Classified By: Amb. Patricia A. Butenis; reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. This is an action cable. Please see para 12.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY. Key diplomatic missions in Bangladesh are coordinating their responses to the ongoing political crisis. The U.S., United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, the European Commission, Germany (representing the European Union presidency) and the United Nations have agreed to coordinated actions prior to scheduled elections on January 22, including meetings with the general secretaries of the two main parties. Other steps to be taken in Bangladesh and by the respective capitals and headquarters are under discussion. Embassy provides recommended actions for Washington in paragraph 12. END SUMMARY.

"COFFEE GROUP" COORDINATES STRATEGY
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¶3. (C) Key missions in Dhaka are coordinating their efforts to respond to the ongoing political crisis. The primary vehicle for cooperation is the "Coffee Group," which includes the US, UK, Canadian, and Australian chiefs of mission, the United Nations representative, the Head of the European Commission Delegation and the German Ambassador (representing the European Union presidency). Japan is also invited as the situation warrants. The group meets frequently on an ad hoc basis.

¶4. (C) Most Coffee Group participants have issued statements locally urging full participation in the elections and calling on all sides to avoid violence. Participants will request their respective capitals that have not already done so to release similar statements of concern, and demarche the Bangladeshi chiefs of mission in their capitals. The group agrees, Washington and London should approach Bangladesh's major multilateral development partners -- the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank -- to request similar statements, within their own institutional constraints.

15. (C) The group seeks to broaden the international reaction to include Bangladesh's key development and trading partners and is requesting statements from the local missions of South Korea, Japan, Russia, and China (the latter two on the basis of the damage the political instability and uncertainty do to the economy and regional stability). The Japanese Ambassador agreed and released a statement on January 10. The Chinese are consulting with Beijing. The group agreed to approach the South Korean and Russian ambassadors in Dhaka, and recommends approaching Saudi Arabia through its embassy in Washington (from the stability angle).

16. (C) On January 11 the Coffee Group plus Japan will meet with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) General Secretary Mannan Bhuiyan, and then with Awami League (AL) General Secretary Abdul Jalil, to reinforce our concerns.

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UNITED NATIONS ACTIONS

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17. (C) On January 10, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement calling on all sides to compromise and refrain from violence. According to the local UN representative, further steps under discussion at UN Headquarters include: a call by the head of UN Peacekeeping to the Bangladesh Army Chief of Staff; a letter from the head of the UN Elections Assistance Division to the President/Chief Advisor noting lack of progress by the Caretaker Government and Election Commission on concerns raised with them in early December; and a possible call from a senior-level UN official to the two party heads offering the services of the Secretary General's "good offices" to

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mediate the dispute.

18. (C) At the UN representative's suggestion, the Coffee Group also decided to ask capitals to add Bangladesh to the UN Security Council agenda. The UN representative said UN Headquarters believes such a proposal could go forward if two or more of the Security Council's permanent members agreed to table it.

ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSIONS CANCELLED

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19. (SBU) Election observation missions are being curtailed or cancelled. USAID-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) have publicly announced they have cancelled their short-term observers. They have also scaled back their long-term observation missions and might withdraw those as well. The Commonwealth and European Commission both cancelled their observation missions. The 34-member Election Working Group (EWG), the domestic observation organization set up by the Asian Foundation, has also announced it will not undertake a national election monitoring initiative under current circumstances. The EWG has also suspended its voter and civic education activities.

LOCAL REACTION TO DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

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10. (SBU) The international community's efforts to help resolve the political impasse are receiving intense coverage in the local press. Every comment by the ambassadors is analyzed for explicit and implicit messages. Statements by the international community questioning the credibility of elections without all major parties have also raised the ire of some in the BNP and its main partner, Jamaat-e Islami. In a statement on January 9, former communications minister and Senior BNP Vice Chairman Nazmul Huda accused foreign diplomats of "an interference in our domestic affairs" and said the actions were provoking a violation of human rights

and the constitution.

FIRM STANCE WITH AWAMI LEAGUE

¶11. (C) The Coffee Group has been clear that it does not endorse the AL's position. Our messages to the AL have been unambiguous: the violence must end; fostering chaos and instability will harm the country's image and economy; and we do not support military intervention or any other extra-constitutional military solutions to the crisis. The Ambassador has expressed concern to AL leader Sheikh Hasina about the latter's hesitation to engage in constructive talks, and urged her to be ready to negotiate (Reftel).

RECOMMENDED ACTION FOR WASHINGTON

¶12. We recommend Washington consider taking the following steps:

- A) Release a statement calling on the Caretaker Government and both parties to work to resolve the crisis.
- B) Convoke the Bangladesh Ambassador to express concern about the crisis.
- C) Instruct USUN to introduce the issue of Bangladesh onto the agenda of the United National Security Council. Coordinate with the UK to support or introduce jointly.
- D) Approach the Saudi Arabian embassy in Washington to request that a statement of concern be issued by their Foreign Ministry or embassy in Dhaka.

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E) Approach the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank to request they issue statements of concern.

COMMENT

¶13. COMMENT. We have declined to be drawn into a discussion of the constitutionality of holding or postponing the election, emphasizing instead that the problem is political in nature and can only be solved if the two parties agree. We stress to both sides the damage done to Bangladesh's economic status and democracy by the parties' refusal to compromise.
END COMMENT.
BUTENIS